





POETRY BY CHARLES SIMIC

*What the Grass Says*

*Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is  
Taking Notes*

*Dismantling the Silence*

*Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of  
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*The Voice at 3:00 a.m.: Selected  
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*Selected Poems, 1963–2003*

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*New and Selected Poems, 1962–*  
*2012*

*The Lunatic*  
*Scribbled in the Dark*  
*Come Closer and Listen*

# No Land in Sight

P o e m s

Charles Simic



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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK  
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FOR HELEN

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**O N E**



FATE

Everyone's blind date.

## ALL BUT INVISIBLE

Sickly fly, taking slow, painful steps  
On a high and narrow parapet,  
Past a long row of tall windows  
With a view of the jagged skyline

And the sun setting beyond it  
Indifferent to your plight,  
Where to turn for help as the wind  
Comes gusting off the Hudson  
River

Eager to sweep you off your feet  
And make you crawl wingless  
On some poorly lit street below  
Along with others down on their  
luck.



## DREAMING OR AWAKE?

A man runs after me in the street  
Offering to sell me a pocket watch.  
He looks like an old-time preacher,  
Pale as a ghost and dressed in  
black.

The clock over the railroad station  
Had stopped at five minutes to  
eleven.  
The one over the savings bank  
Swore it was almost three o'clock

When he accosted me with his  
watch  
Whose lack of hands and numerals  
He wanted me to study and admire  
Before I gasped at his asking price.

# I WATCHED THE WIND

Thumbing pages and pages  
Of a thick encyclopedia  
Thrown out with the trash,  
In a hurry to find an answer.

## WINTER MORNINGS

There used to be a row of movie  
houses

On this block of new buildings,  
Where the homeless went to get  
warm,

Wives to forget their husbands,  
And a boy or two to skip school,

Watching cowboys and vampires,  
Bank robbers and chorus girls  
Busy doing what they normally do,  
Only to freeze on the screen  
Staring baffled into the distance

Where fire engines and police cars  
Could be heard wailing in the  
street,

And afterwards the sound of sleet,  
Lashing at people hurrying to work  
And leaving trails of wet footprints.

# EVERYONE IS RUNNING LATE

One can see it by the way the birds  
Dart back and forth, the squirrels  
Race up a tree, the bits of trash  
Scurry with each new gust of wind.

And yes! Here comes a young  
    woman  
In a dress too tight and heels too  
    high,  
Shouting and waving her arms to  
    alert  
The bus driver pulling from the  
    curb,

While he eagerly steps on the gas  
As if late for his own wedding,  
His bride cooling her heels at city  
    hall,  
Eyeing strangers hurrying in and  
    out.

## THE MUSIC BOX

Ladies and gents hung in rows of  
portraits  
In the living room of your town  
house,  
Over a small cross and a music box  
That nowadays plays only silence  
To an audience of draped chairs  
and sofas,

Do you hear the homeless woman  
Comfort a scared little dog by her  
side  
As she spreads rags for their bed  
Beneath the marble steps your  
servants  
Used to scrub daily for dirty  
footprints?



## MY POSSESSIONS

I have lots of dead friends  
And streets I roam at all hours  
With eyes open or shut,  
Hoping to run into them.

I have many address books  
With crossed-out names,  
Two clocks and a dozen  
    wristwatches  
I haven't heard tick in years.

I have a large black umbrella  
I am scared to open indoors,  
As well as when I step outdoors,  
No matter how hard it rains.

Like a cobbler lost in a shoe  
He is repairing, I rarely look up  
From what I am doing,  
One foot in the grave, of course.

## MY CITY

With its dimly lit streets  
From black-and-white movies,  
Trashy mystery novels,  
And destitute people  
Shivering in its doorways.

## PARADISE LOUNGE

One sucker still left  
In that dive across the street.  
The woman sitting  
In his lap topless,  
Her smile frozen  
Eyeing the one onstage  
Stroking her crotch  
And gasping for air  
As if drowning in live mud.  
The hell-like metropolis  
Emptying at this hour.  
Flies changing places  
On a corpse, or so they say.



## NOVEMBER

The crosses all men and women  
Must carry through life  
Even more visible  
On this dark and rainy night.

## ON THIS STREET

My mother carried me in her arms  
Out of a burning building  
And set me down on the sidewalk  
Like a puppet bundled in rags,  
Where now I stand years later  
Talking to a homeless dog,  
Half-hidden behind a parked car,  
His eyes brimming with hope  
As he inches forward ready for the  
    worst.

WHERE DO MY GALLOWS  
STAND?

Outside the window  
I looked out as a child  
In an occupied city  
Quiet as a graveyard.

DEAR LORD

Does the loud ticking  
Of my alarm clock  
Keep you awake?

Do you lie thinking  
The stars in the sky  
Were a big mistake?

## THE MIRAGE

Like a cartoon of a man in a desert,  
Fallen on his knees and dying of  
thirst,  
Who suddenly sees ahead of him  
A fresh pond and some palm trees,

Once on a train approaching  
Chicago,  
I saw a snow-peak mountain  
I knew perfectly well was not  
there,  
And yet I kept looking, seeing even

A green meadow with sheep  
grazing,  
When the clouds of black smoke  
Swirling over the huge steel mills  
Hid that lovely vision from my  
eyes.

## PAWNSHOP WINDOW

A huge blonde doll  
In short pink dress  
Guarded by kitchen knives  
Of every size  
About to clap  
Her chubby hands  
As some Romeo tears  
Himself from his date  
And strides over  
To admire the display.



## OBJECT MATRIMONY

World-famous fire-eater  
Seeking a tantric dancer  
To join him on the sea bottom  
And blow bubbles with him.

COULD THAT BE ME?

An alarm clock  
With no hands  
Ticking loudly  
On the town dump.



**T W O**



THERE IS NOTHING  
QUIETER

Than the softly falling snow  
Fretting over each flake  
And making sure  
It doesn't wake someone.

## THE BIG LIE

The hush of a summer morning  
Bathed in the light of the rising  
    sun,  
Moved me so much with its beauty  
Never did I suspect a hoax,  
Till I caught sight of a black cat  
Crossing the yard in a hurry  
And glancing over its shoulder  
With mounting apprehension,  
Before ditching my little paradise  
That had given it the creeps.

## FAMILY GRAVEYARD

Angry men and furious women  
Buried side by side years ago,  
Their curses and muffled sobs  
Making trees shudder to this day.

## THE MYSTERY

What do these mutts barking in  
unison  
Up and down our road know  
That we haven't learned yet?  
Burglars breaking into a home.  
A new bride hanging from a tree.

You'd think by now their owners  
Would yell at them to shut up  
And chase them all indoors,  
Since they managed to wake  
This whole damn neighborhood.

Unless it is something else tonight  
That's got them all upset,  
Like seeing a star call it quits  
After millions of years  
And take a long dive out of sight.

# A HUGE OLD TREE

Fed up with its noisy leaves  
And sweetly chirping birds,  
Plus a young woodpecker  
Drilling himself a new home.

## ON YORK BEACH

These rough and surly waves  
Look like they wouldn't mind  
Drowning a pair of unhappy lovers  
On this cold December evening.

## ONE SUMMER

Someone played a flute  
In the cemetery at night  
While young girls danced  
Naked among the tombstones.  
Francis, the gravedigger,  
Told us that and lots more,  
So we went there one night  
To see for ourselves,  
But nobody showed up.  
It got late and kind of spooky,  
When we heard the flute  
Wailing as if trying to coax  
A big fat cobra to dance,  
But we were too chicken  
To go over and take a peek.



## NEIGHBORHOOD DOGS

My wife went past them every day  
Telling those who barked at her,  
“Go home, little doggie, go home,”  
Which puzzled them to no end,  
Since that’s where they all were  
Fiercely guarding their homes  
On a road nobody else walked,  
But her and an old mutt who came  
Along each day to keep her  
    company  
And who himself had nothing to  
    say.

## AN OLD WOMAN

Walking with dignified air  
Down her driveway to the mailbox  
Accompanied by a hen  
Who stops as she does

To watch her mistress  
As she pries open the lid  
And takes a look inside  
Before sticking her hand in

And finding no letter  
Remains deep in thought  
Before turning home  
In the afternoon gloom

Alongside her companion  
Who keeps nodding  
And clucking to herself,  
*I told you so, you old fool.*

# THE POOR MAN'S HORSE

All skin and bones  
And left in freezing rain,  
His head hung low  
As if saying a prayer.

## SUNRISE

As if a witch or a holy martyr  
Were being burnt at the stake.  
Red snowflakes coming down  
In the glow of the rising sun.  
The shadow each tree clung to  
Fleeing like a purse snatcher  
As hot embers fall in my yard,  
Inviting me to test my faith  
By walking barefoot over them.

## WHEN IN THE MOOD

The devil plays the harp  
Like an angel in heaven,  
And the slide trombone  
Like a hot Dixieland band.

## TWO WIDOWS

They say she'd wear a strapless  
black dress  
And carry a martini glass in her  
hand  
As she went to visit the cows at  
sundown  
And tell them things she told no  
one else.

Or how she'd walk down to her  
pond, strip  
And go for a swim with someone  
spying  
On every move she makes as she  
wades in  
Humming off-key a song from her  
youth.

Most likely, it was a neighbor,  
another widow,  
Who'd been watching her all these  
years,  
Sneaking up to her house almost  
every night,

Hoping to hear laughter and  
glasses clinking.

# SNAPSHOT

He was caught  
Sitting pretty  
With a tough-guy  
Look that said:

I've got it good,  
And now you  
Have it good, baby,  
Whoever you are,

Seeing me fall  
Into your arms  
Out of a book  
At a garage sale.



## ADORABLE BED

Love of my life, I only wish  
I could take you to Venice tonight,  
Where you'd be my gondola  
And I your singing gondolier.

## WINDY DAY

Two pair of underwear,  
One white and the other pink,  
Flew up and down  
On the laundry line,  
Telling the whole world  
They are madly in love.

# CRICKETS

Blessed are those  
For whom time  
Doesn't run,  
But drags its feet

Seemingly in no hurry,  
Like that sailboat  
Way out on the bay  
Arrested in its flight,

Two gulls hurrying there  
To see what's up?  
And closer to home,  
Crickets, crickets, crickets.

# PYRAMIDS AND SPHINXES

*For David Rivard*

There's a famous street in Paris  
Called Rue des Pyramides.  
The Sunday I went to see for  
myself,  
An old woman with a heavy limp,  
Who could've been a hundred  
years old,  
Overtook me in a great hurry,

Waving her cane and pointing  
At something behind my back.  
A guillotine chopping heads?  
Some grand duke and duchess  
Disembarrassed of their own  
And raised for the crowd to cheer?

There was nothing of the kind,  
Just a peeling poster on a café wall  
With the Egyptian sphinx on it,  
Blind and half-buried in the sand,  
And still looking mighty pleased  
To be advertising a famous aperitif.

**T H R E E**



## LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

Didn't know I was doing it.  
Had a notion I was living  
A nice, quiet old age  
Patting children on the head,  
Feeding pigeons in the park.

My peace of mind ended  
The night I found a man asleep  
On my doorstep. *How can*  
*This be?* I thought to myself  
As I stepped over him carefully.

Three times I rose that night  
And tiptoed to the door, trying to  
Hear him breathe. At daybreak,  
I took a cup of coffee to him,  
But he was gone, leaving behind

His hat. Surely not far, I thought,  
Walking out in my robe and  
slippers  
Into the snow-covered street,  
Peeking into doorways as I went,  
Calling, "Hey mister! O brother!"

# WEATHER FORECAST

Sunny day shadowed  
By dark thoughts,  
And come evening,  
A sky full of clouds  
In their tragic robes.

## WALT WHITMAN

Sparrows and pigeons flock  
To where he lies sprawled,  
Long-haired and white-bearded,  
His back against a wall  
On this badly run-down block  
Where the homeless come to die  
And people stop to witness  
This morning's miracle,  
A young woman in high heels  
Squatting on the sidewalk  
While tearing up a loaf of bread  
To feed the toothless old poet.



## BIG SHOT

You, in a long black overcoat and  
hat,  
Striding past me  
On this busy downtown street  
While giving me the air,  
I have a hunch  
You are the one who cracks the  
whip  
Around here and gives  
Two-bit grippers like me the gate.  
Is that true, big shot?  
Better hop into that long limo  
Idling at the curb,  
'Cause I'm getting hot under the  
collar  
And may yet blow my fuse.

## THE YOUNG LADY SAID

“I don’t mind being cross-eyed,  
So was Venus, I’ve been told,”  
Said one woman to another  
Leaving a crowded discotheque.

## MEMORIES OF HELL

We were surprised by birds  
singing,  
A little girl rocking a doll to sleep,  
And a circus tent in a parking lot  
With a troupe of performing dogs.

The stores, however, looked closed,  
Except for a brightly lit tattoo  
parlor.  
Persephone's children out in front  
Chatting and laughing far into the  
night.

You want to know about the fires?  
We saw flames rising everywhere  
And buildings blackened by them  
With windows the color of dried  
blood.

The lone beggar we bumped into  
Wanted to tell us the story of his  
life,  
But with Satan's palace still to visit

We made excuses and hurried  
away.

# CIRCUS

There go the bear and the lion  
In the night sky.  
The troops of fire-eaters  
And jugglers of burning torches  
Are right behind them  
Doing stunts not visible  
To the naked eye,  
But known to astronomers  
And to our neighbor's dog  
Notifying people in their beds  
Tonight's show has begun.

## ON THE WAY TO BINGHAMTON

Where you took a wrong exit,  
Not realizing you'd done that,  
As if asleep at the wheel,  
Or driven by a premonition  
Of something wonderful  
Awaiting you in a pet shop  
Where you stopped to ask for  
    directions  
And ran into a large parrot  
Squawking about something  
To the pretty saleslady  
With large hoop earrings,  
Busy feeding hamsters,  
One of whom she called Dave.

## MY DOUBLES

In my youth, women took me aside  
at parties

To tell me that I reminded them  
Of a dead brother or a former lover  
Who all wore round glasses like  
mine.

One of them lay in a tub with cut  
wrists,

Another went for a ride in a  
balloon

And hasn't been heard from ever  
since.

One played the piano so beautifully  
Total strangers knocked on his  
door

Pleading to be allowed to come in  
and listen.

As for me, the last time someone  
saw me,

I was reading the Bible on the  
subway,

Shaking my head and chuckling to  
myself.

## IN THIS HEAVY TRAFFIC

What if I were to ditch my car  
And walk away without a glance  
back?

While drivers honk their horns  
As I stroll into the nearby woods,

Determined, once and for all,  
To swap this breed of raving  
lunatics  
For a more benign kind who dwell  
Long-haired and naked close to  
nature.

I'll let the sun in the sky be my  
guide  
As I roam the countryside, stopping  
To chat with a porcupine or a  
butterfly,  
While subsisting on edible plants I  
find,

Glad to share my meal with a  
moose,  
Or find a bear licking my face



As I wake from a nap wondering,  
    *Where am I?*  
*Stuck in the traffic, you damn fool!*

# THE FUNERAL

The graveside tears and prayers  
over,  
A dog came to bark as we walked  
Between headstones, sneaking  
peeks  
At the widow's skirt teased by the  
wind,  
While an undertaker raced after us  
Waving an umbrella someone left  
behind.

Meanwhile, we thought of our old  
pal  
Looking pissed in his posh new  
coffin  
As his wife's limo idled at the gate,  
But where had she vanished just  
now?  
Most likely behind some bush to  
pee  
With a long ride home ahead of  
her.

# LEFT OUT OF THE BIBLE

What Adam said to Eve  
As they lay in the dark:  
Honey, go and take a look.  
What's making that dog bark?

I'VE BEEN THINKING OF

Madmen who wander night and  
day

The great cities of the world  
Hearing voices in their heads  
And stopping to quarrel with them.

## IN THE AMUSEMENT PARK

Blood-curdling screams  
Riding up and down  
On the Ferris wheel,

Faces like a pack of cards  
Tossed in the air by a gambler  
Who just lost his pants.

And on the drive home,  
Dark roadside bushes  
With necking couples

Surprised by our headlights,  
And ducking like ducks  
In the shooting gallery.

# TANGO

Slinky black dress  
On a wire hanger  
In an empty closet  
Its doors slid open

To catch the draft  
From an open window  
And make it dance  
As in a deep trance

The empty hangers  
Clicking in unison  
Like knitting needles  
Or disapproving tongues.

# THE INSOMNIAC

Stuffing angels and demons  
Like sticks of dynamite  
Inside his graying head  
As he sits in his motel bed,

His tongue a lit fuse  
With a dancing little flame  
Setting his brain on fire  
While whispering in his ear:

Seeing you gloomy like this,  
On a swell June night,  
You are either a village idiot  
Or a god of some cursed tribe.

# HOOT, LITTLE OWL

Are you there?  
Is there a *there*  
Truly out there?

Hoot or keep quiet,  
Whatever you like.  
The night is dark,

Even though later  
There may be stars  
Astounded to see us here.



## FIRST THING IN THE MORNING

You eavesdrop on birds  
Gossiping in your yard,  
Eager to find out what  
They are saying about you.

**F O U R**



## SOME FOLKS OUT LATE

Unknown bird, you shrieked  
Once, then twice more,  
As if a knife neared your throat  
In one of the huge trees  
At the far end of the lawn.

It made the babe in his mother's  
arms  
Stir restlessly in his sleep.  
Earlier there'd been talk of war  
And of the fine weather we are  
having,  
When the night fell suddenly

Blurring our faces on the porch  
With what remained unspoken  
In the thickening darkness,  
A lake of blood still visible,  
Where the sun had just gone down.

## THE CROW

Early this morning  
Its blood-soaked wings  
Rose high above me  
Like huge scissors  
Snipping at strings  
Holding my puppet head  
So it doesn't fall off  
As my feet go jitterbugging  
On the ice in the yard.

## CASSIOPEIA

Great empires going to hell,  
Their cities torn by crimes,  
Must mean nothing to you,  
Nor does this peaceful lake  
Where you come to bathe.

Perhaps hearing us whisper  
Your pretty name in the dark  
As we hug each other tightly  
Is as close as you ever get  
To partake of love and its  
mysteries?



## COME SPRING

Don't let that birdie in a tree  
Fool you with its pretty song,  
The wicked are back from hell  
Doing all the vicious things  
That had them sent down below.

They brought Satan along  
To lend them a helping hand  
As they think up new evils,  
For his guile has no equal  
Nor does his bottomless hate.



## JUST SO YOU KNOW

None of these money-grabbing  
bastards  
And their bored wives, thin as  
wasps,  
Have a soul to sell, Mr. Devil.  
You'd have better luck with their  
poodles,  
Though some are quick-tempered  
And may snap at your ankles.  
However, if you still want to give it  
a try,  
This old couple live in a penthouse  
With a view of the Statue of  
Liberty.

# I NEVER FORGET ANYTHING

That's my trouble!  
Like that shoe box of ripped  
    photographs  
I came across on the town dump,  
And helped myself to one  
Of a couple in bathing suits  
Holding hands on some tropical  
    beach,  
Whose heads and faces  
The wind had swept away  
While I busied myself  
Studying what was left  
Of their youth and of their beauty.



## NIGHT THOUGHTS

Light frightens them. Darkness too.  
They crawl into our beds,  
Not to talk, but to whisper  
The way one does in the morgue.

# CELEBRITY SIGHTINGS

Tragedy and Comedy  
Stepping out of a white limo  
In oversized wigs  
And diminutive skirts,  
Blowing kisses left and right.

Bedlam of adoring fans,  
Shoving and pleading  
For one more glimpse,  
When all of a sudden  
Panic and screams ahead.

Is someone, we wonder,  
Already lying stabbed  
On the slick dance floor,  
Croaking out a name  
We are dying to hear?

The towering bodyguards  
With shaved heads  
And mirror-tinted glasses  
Won't say or even deign  
To acknowledge our presence.

## IN THE LOCKDOWN

I might have gone stir-crazy,  
If not for my memories,  
Those lifelong companions  
Cooped up with me for months  
And eager to console me

With stories of men and women  
Who withdraw from the world,  
And endured years of solitude  
And dark nights of the soul  
Thriving in some hole-in-the-wall

Where they found lasting peace  
Obeying a voice in their heads  
Telling them to just sit quietly,  
So that the quiet can teach them  
Everything they ought to know.

## RAINY EVENING

Someone catching sight  
Of his reflection in a store window  
Impersonating a person  
With blood and guts  
Fleeing from someone,  
Yet afraid to look back  
At the one in hot pursuit  
With no more substance  
Than a ghost picture  
On black-and-white TV  
In his dead parent's bedroom,  
With its station off the air.

## EL MAGNIFICO

These trees have been put under a  
spell

By some master of the art  
Who pointed a finger at them  
And ordered them to be still  
As they've done so ever since,  
Spooking the birds not to tweet,  
The million leaves not to fidget  
One long and hot summer day  
Till he dons his black cape  
And top hat and makes his exit  
Under the cover of darkness.

## SUMMER DUSK

You've been the love of my life,  
Light lingering in the sky  
At the close of a long day  
Over the roofs of some city  
Like New York or Rome,  
As streets empty in the heat,  
And shadows lengthen  
And darken every room,  
Occupied or still vacant,  
Where some turn on the lamp  
And others step to a window  
To savor this fleeting moment  
When everything stops  
As if stunned by its own beauty.

## MY LOVE

We are like a couple of frogs  
Basking in a soup pot  
Slowly heated on the stove,  
Loving the lukewarm water

And calling on all frogs  
In every pond and puddle  
To hurry up and join us  
In this tropical paradise.

They won't be able to resist,  
Seeing family and friends  
Splashing each other below  
Without a care in the world.

## DARK WINDOW

Of a crying woman  
With her tears briefly lit  
By the bright headlights  
Of a slow passing car.



# HOT SUMMER NIGHT

The lazy light of distant stars  
And down here on Earth  
The cheerful sound of a brook  
Cooling a fat watermelon.

# ALL OVER THE WORLD NOW

Lovers are undressing lovers  
And cursing the buttons,  
Big and small, and zippers  
Stubbornly stuck half-open.

MY LIFE IS AS REAL AS  
YOURS

Said the cricket  
In the thicket  
As the summer ended  
And night fell.

# ON GROVE STREET

Night, dark goddess,

I saw you fleeing  
As the day broke,

Like someone's secret lover  
Sneaking out of their bed

And glancing back once  
Hearing my footsteps.

# THE WIND HAS DIED

My little boat,  
Take care.

There is no  
Land in sight.

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## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Simic is a poet, essayist, and translator who was born in Yugoslavia in 1938 and immigrated to the United States in 1954. Since 1967, he has published more than twenty books of his own poetry, in addition to a memoir and numerous books of translations, for which he has received many literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award, the Griffin Poetry Prize, a MacArthur Fellowship, and the Wallace Stevens Award. Simic was a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and in 2007 was chosen as poet laureate of the United States. He is an emeritus professor at the University of New Hampshire, where he has taught since 1973, and was formerly a distinguished visiting writer at New York University.



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